

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 BANGKOK 006524

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2015

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY PROMOTION STRATEGIES FOR EAP FOCUS
COUNTRIES - THAILAND

REF: A) SECSTATE 169892 B) BANGKOK 006094

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH L. BOYCE, reasons 1.5 (b),(d)

[11.](#) (C) Summary and introduction: Thailand is the most democratic country in the neighborhood, with a lively press and fiercely competed elections. Thailand's remarkable political development, after a long period of military rule, progressed in tandem with its impressive economic development, which gave its citizens greater access to education and mass media, reinforcing the transition to democracy. In 1997, Thailand adopted a new constitution, meant to consolidate yet further the country's democratic progress.

[12.](#) (C) Things have not gone quite as expected. The 1997 Asian financial crisis discredited the Democrat Party in power during the initial recovery stages, and left the population uncertain and eager for a strong leader. Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party took advantage of the opening, winning a commanding majority in the 2001 elections and an even larger one in 2005. Thaksin is the strongest Prime Minister in Thai history -- the only one, in fact, to serve out his full term and be re-elected. One of the goals of the 1997 Constitution was to build a more stable parliamentary system and stronger political parties by making it more difficult for MPs to jockey for political advantage by changing party affiliation. Thaksin has cleverly used these provisions to increase the cohesion and clout of TRT and expand his personal power. Thaksin also built his personal stature with populist programs, like cheap credit and cheap medical care, that won the enthusiastic support of the poorer voters, especially in the rural areas. Thailand's opposition parties and NGOs have never come up against anything quite like Thaksin, and they are playing political catch-up. Thailand remains a democracy, but one in which the balance among the political and social forces is unhealthy.

[13.](#) (C) Post works on many levels to promote greater democracy in Thailand. We are not optimistic that major changes can occur here in the 6-8 month timeframe requested in ref A, but we believe that post's interventions and programs are already having effect here and will continue to do so. The information below responds to the questions in ref [1A](#). Specific suggestions for additional resources or other Washington action are contained in paras 7,11,14,15,17 and [19](#). End summary and introduction.

4.(C) IDENTIFY THE KEY AREAS OF DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

-- Media Freedom. Thailand still has some of the most lively and vibrant media in the region, but it is being constricted. The government's use of libel suits and the purchase of media outlets by 'Friends of Thaksin' have limited the public's access to independent news. The government is attempting to shut down many community radio stations on weak, technical pretexts. Journalists have questionable ethics and sensationalize stories to sell papers.

-- Muslim unrest. In the South, the government lacks a smart policy to combat anti-government violence, insurgency and separatism. Society lacks mechanisms to promote reconciliation and ethnic harmony. The security problem in the South is a threat to democracy around the country, as the government uses terrorism as an excuse for "emergency" regulations that could limit individual freedoms, especially press freedom. Security forces are implicated in human rights abuses.

-- Rule of law/law enforcement/transparency. Weak corporate governance and transparency regulations foster money politics and corrupt the political system. The poor performance by police, due both to lack of training and lack of motivation, contributes to human rights abuses. The security forces are hampered by poor coordination and interagency distrust. In the South, the lack of access to justice is one of the key elements feeding anti-government feeling.

-- Voter education/election monitoring. Given the lack of opposition access to broadcast media, voters may have limited information about their choices, or about criticisms of the conduct of the elections. Vote buying and, in some areas, voter intimidation, still occur.

-- Weak institutions. The 1997 Constitution calls for a range of independent institutions, starting with a non-partisan Senate and including agencies to combat corruption, oversee media, etc. These new institutions are still too weak to accomplish their goals. In some cases, the Senate has moved too slowly to establish these agencies; in other cases, the government has effectively blocked the work of agencies that might limit its power, or co-opted them. The Senators are not the independent "wise men" foreseen in the constitution; most are partisan, with the TRT faction dominant.

15. (C) IDENTIFY THE 3-5 MOST IMPORTANT DESIRED OUTCOMES OVER THE NEXT 6-8 MONTHS

-- Media. Desired outcome: Journalists/civil society better able to resist efforts by government and political interests in limiting press freedom. Longer term goals: fewer threats to independent media.

-- Justice/South. Desired outcome: International interest and raised RTG awareness lead to a decrease in security force abuses in the South; government officials recognize that overreaction only fuels insurgent, anti-government feeling. Improved access to justice for Southern Muslims. Longer term goals: improved administration of justice, improvements in police and peaceful resolution of the conflict in the South. Greater public confidence in the probity of government institutions.

-- Rule of Law/Law enforcement. Desired outcome: we cannot expect to have any measurable impact in 6-8 months. In the longer term, current embassy programs should contribute to improved professional ethics by judges and lawyers. The most important, and hardest, outcome to achieve is improved performance by police and other security forces, both in terms of competence and in terms of respect for human rights. Making progress in this area would require a significant increase in USG resources addressed towards the basic police training academies and refresher training for working officers.

-- Elections. Desired outcome: effective engagement by civil society on voter education and election monitoring, leading to a free and fair election for the Senate in April/May 2006.

SIX MONTH DIPLOMATIC AND PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGY

MEDIA

16. (SBU) Post has a range of programs already in place to support free and objective media

-- We are about to begin a \$500,000 project to expand and improve objective media coverage of social and political development throughout Thailand, with particular attention to broader, accurate coverage of minority concerns, regional developments and social conflict.

-- Post regularly sends journalists on IV programs and includes them in other PAO outreach activities.

17. (SBU) Post has several pending requests that would contribute to strengthening independent media:

-- Post has requested funding to support English-language education for journalists. This is the fastest way to get journalists access to a variety of viewpoints on political issues.

-- For journalism support particularly relevant to the problems in the South, please see paras 10 and 12 below.

18. (C) Other measures to achieve desired outcomes:

-- Post has highlighted the encroachments on press freedom in our human rights report, and in conversations with Thai officials.

-- The Senate finally named the new National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) just last week. PAO and POL intend to work together to encourage the new NBC to act fairly and objectively as it makes decisions on spectrum allocation. In particular, we will emphasize the importance of a workable system to permit community radio, one of the most promising avenues to getting independent, relevant news to the voters.

MUSLIM UNREST/THE SOUTH

19. (C) The situation in the South is one of post's top priorities. Security concerns make travel and programming in

the South difficult, but post has so far been able to maintain a regular travel program. Post frequently raises the problem of the South with Thai officials and civil society at all levels. Widespread distrust of the US by southern Muslims is one of the biggest obstacles post faces in its outreach efforts.

-- Post sends officers to the South regularly to meet with a wide range of residents -- officials, religious leaders, NGOs and others from both Muslim and Buddhist communities.

-- Post is monitoring the trial of police implicated in the disappearance of a prominent Muslim lawyer. Post is cooperating with a range of NGOs to follow the trial proceedings and to underscore international concerns regarding the case of this well-known Muslim leader and the alleged role of police in his disappearance and presumed death.

-- Post maintains close contact with the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), the organization set up by the government to prepare recommendations to end violence and resolve the problems in the region. The NRC enjoys considerable respect and credibility, and post underscores in discussions at all levels the importance of taking the NRC recommendations into account in setting government policy to respond to the unrest in the area.

10. (C) Post has a vigorous outreach program in the South, including three American corners at universities in the region which have hosted DVCs and speaker programs. Through the "Shared Futures" initiative, PAO has partnered with a local Muslim organization to distribute "branded" backpack kits to schoolchildren, and will work with a local vocational institution to distribute 1,200 sewing machines to Muslim villagers; this is aimed at empowering Muslim women heads-of-household through micro-enterprise development. Post involves members of the Muslim minority in the full range of PAO programs, including IVs, and programs to promote English-language study.

-- Post also distributes information in the local Malay dialect as well as Thai language, and has worked with the broadcast media on programming, most recently supporting a TV COOP project for a series of broadcasts on the American Muslim community which will be airing over the next several months. PAO is also using TV COOP programming from Indonesia, which is has dubbed into local languages and is currently being broadcast.

11. (SBU) We believe that several small steps could improve Post's ability to reach out to this key community. First, we could use publications geared to less-educated readers. Even when translated, many Department publications are geared at too high a level for these readers. Second, the local TV stations in the Muslim area are hungry for additional programming and we could place far more Department provided broadcast programming if we had the English-language scripts to facilitate translation.

12. (SBU) USAID is administering a \$500,000 program for the South implemented through Asia Foundation to help build citizen engagement in and commitment to moderate democratic values and institutions. The program, which is just getting underway, focuses on efforts in three key areas --local government, universities and Islamic schools. This represents a major increase in USG resources directed toward the problems in the South.

13. (C) Post has provided Department with a list of priority projects for funding from the FY05 Supplemental Peacekeeping Operations Allocations to Support the Global War on Terrorism (ref B). One of post's top priorities for this funding is a project to provide non-lethal weapons and civil disturbance training for Thai military units deploying to the South. The Thai military specifically requested this assistance, a sign that its leaders are aware of the high cost of military mistakes in responding to civil disturbances. Since late 2004, post has been cooperating with the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS) so that training through the Joint Combined Exchanges and Training (JCET), Counterdrug (Baker) and IMET programs include more comprehensive human rights training for military forces before they deploy to the South.

14. (C) If more resources were available: Post has also requested support for conflict resolution and Muslim outreach programs from the FY05 Supplemental PKO Allocations to support the GWOT. We do not anticipate that all of these projects can be funded with the available resources, but believe that they all merit USG support (further details on programs in ref B). These projects include:

-- a program to study populist anti-terrorism movements and to share other countries' approaches with Southern leaders (cost: \$29k)

-- a program to promote journalistic responsibility and investigative journalism in the South, in partnership with the Association of Yala Journalists (cost: \$25k)

-- a program to support training for community radio operators, in partnership with the Campaign for Popular Media Reform (cost: \$25k)

-- a grant to a nascent NGO, "Friends of Thai Muslim Women," to help it establish itself and work to with Muslim women to counter political extremism through development (cost: \$7k)

15. (C) In addition, there are many Thai organizations working to improve the administration of justice in the South. Post would welcome the opportunity, for example, to support the work of the legal aid alliance formed by the NRC, the National Human Rights Commission and the Law Society, which have set up legal aid centers in the South to provide residents there with access to legal representation. There would be many opportunities to work on projects like this with good partners if additional funding were available.

RULE OF LAW/LAW ENFORCEMENT/TRANSPARENCY

16. (SBU) INL through the Narcotics Assistance Section (NAS) takes the lead in these areas.

-- NAS funds a ABA/CEELI program on judicial ethics; over the next 8 months, this American Bar Association-conducted program will hold seminars and training on Legal Ethics, Judicial Ethics, and Prosecutor Ethics as well as a seminar for the National Counter-Corruption Commission (NCCC). It will provide expertise for professional ethics curriculum development, and support other public awareness/outreach activities.

-- INL supports a resident legal advisor from the Department of Justice, who works on issues of legal and procedural reform and anti-corruption measures.

-- In designing upcoming police training through the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), NAS will strengthen the human rights and professional responsibility elements in its courses.

-- For law enforcement training specifically oriented to the situation in the South, please see para 13, above.

17. (C) If additional resources were available: Post believes that increased resources for police training, correctly used, could have an impact over the medium-to-long term. INL currently restricts the training of provincial police, in response to a series of extra-judicial killings connected to an anti-drug campaign conducted in 2003. Historically, the provincial police have had a poor record, with cases of corruption, human rights abuses and ineffective policing too common. Other elements of the security forces, including National Police, have a somewhat better record, although the lack of accountability is a pervasive problem affecting all the security forces. There are officials within the National Police who understand the need to professionalize the force and who would work seriously with us toward that goal. As an interim measure, post will review the range of USG-sponsored training for security forces and counter-terrorism, and look for ways to use existing programs to also promote more responsible and accountable policing. Following this review, post may advocate for a carefully-considered expansion of USG police training, perhaps along the model of ICITAP's Indonesia program.

VOTER EDUCATION/ELECTION MONITORING

18. (SBU) Post will monitor upcoming by-elections and the Senate elections early next year.
-- Post has regular contact with representatives of all the main political parties and closely follows allegations of unfair practices by the government to restrict their activities, raising issues with RTG officials as appropriate.

-- Post meets regularly with the main voter education and monitoring organization, Pollwatch.

19. (C) If additional resources were available: Pollwatch is underfunded and would benefit from additional support through grants or collaboration with an appropriate US NGO, such as NDI or IFES. Post will encourage Pollwatch to apply for PAO-sponsored grants through the Democracy Commission/small grants program, if funding for these is available this year.

INSTITUTION BUILDING

120. (C) Post cannot expect to make much impact over the next 6-8 months on the building of stronger institutions. Many of the agencies established in the 1997 Constitution to safeguard civil liberties are appointed by the Senate, whose term will end in March. Incumbents cannot run for re-election, so all 200 seats will be open when the elections are held in April or May 2006. Once we see the composition of the new Senate, post will evaluate the efficacy of possible programs, such as IV or speakers, that might assist reformers. Given budget constraints, we will probably be unable to do much programming with the new Senate before the new fiscal year, but can begin outreach to the new members immediately after the elections.

MAJOR NEEDS/MAJOR IMPEDIMENTS

121. (C) Thailand is still significantly ahead of its neighbors in its democratic development, and therefore it is appropriate that the lion's share of democracy-building resources are used elsewhere. Nonetheless, our strategy outlined above shows that some additional resources could be well-used to promote our democracy goals here.

SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCES

122. (C) The most significant influences contributing to democratization here is Thailand's own civil society. Thailand has a wealth of NGOs and advocacy groups, with relatively few limits on their activities. Public awareness of civil/human rights issues has grown with increased access to media and education. Human rights NGOs maintain contacts with international partners. Political parties campaign vigorously. The push for more progress on democracy can and must come from the Thai people. The US can provide support by targeted diplomatic interventions and programs of the kind outlined above.

CONSEQUENCES

123. (C) The US and Thailand enjoy an excellent relationship. We have long and close ties to most sectors in Thai society, from the political leaders of all parties, through the military and up to the royal family. Thais and Americans are connected by family ties, alumni associations, business interests: we do not believe that there will be long-term negative consequences to our efforts to support democracy here. In the short term, we must recognize that the current Prime Minister is famously sensitive to criticism and quick to use nationalist and populist messages to build support for his positions. Even though his soaring popularity has sagged somewhat recently, he remains genuinely popular and effective at using his office to rally support. Efforts based on confrontation and direct public criticism of the PM and his policies are unlikely, in our view, to be as effective as those that build on the genuine progress Thailand's other institutions have steadily built in recent years.

BOYCE